



# LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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November 2012

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## **Don't Count on Stroke of Luck to Avert Stroke**

**By Melanie Reynolds**

At what age should you begin to be concerned about the possibility of having a stroke? Age 75, 55, 35?

You may be surprised to learn that the answer is: right now! According to research published in a medical journal just last month, strokes are affecting people at younger ages.

The study found that almost 20 percent of stroke victims were under the age of 55. One reason may be that many of the risk factors for stroke – high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity – are also on the rise among younger people.

The bottom line is, there's no age at which your risk of stroke is zero.

### **Stealing Independence**

Stroke is a "brain attack" caused when blood fails to flow to the brain. It's the fifth leading cause of death in Lewis and Clark County and fourth in the country. Nationwide, more than 700,000 strokes occur each year, causing about 160,000 deaths, according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Those who don't die may lose their ability to speak, understand, or control parts of their body, temporarily or permanently; in other words, they may be robbed of their ability to live independently. Stroke is the leading cause of disability in adults.

The trend toward strokes in younger people is a public health concern because it means longer periods of lifetime disability. The cost of stroke in dollars alone is estimated to be almost \$54 billion a year, according to the American Heart Association. Of course, a price tag doesn't begin to measure the pain and grief of patients and their friends and family.

### **Taking Steps to Saves Lives**

The good news buried within the grim statistics is that we can all take steps to help prevent stroke. Scientists at the NIH predict that, by continuing to work to reduce the risks of stroke and by using

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available therapies and developing new ones, Americans should be able to prevent 80 percent of all strokes.

A risk factor is a condition or behavior that raises your risk of a disease like stroke. Your risk grows as the number and severity of your risk factors increases.

There are some risk factors you can't do anything about, like age, gender, race, and family history. The risk of stroke doubles each decade between the ages 55 and 85. Men are more likely to have strokes, but women are more likely to die of them. Stroke is more common and deadly among African Americans. A family history of stroke increases your risk by about 30 percent.

## Rating Your Risk

But when it comes to stroke, there are many risk factors that you *can* influence to lower your chances of getting the disease.

- **High blood pressure** is a major risk factor for stroke. If your blood pressure is high (140 over 90 or higher), your doctor can recommend ways to bring it down, from eating right and exercising more to taking prescription medicines. Reducing salt and increasing potassium in your diet may help lower your blood pressure.
- **Abnormal heart beat**, or atrial fibrillation (Afib), can quintuple your stroke risk. Afib can cause blood to pool in the heart and may form a clot and cause a stroke. A doctor must diagnose and treat Afib.
- **Smoking** doubles your risk of stroke. It damages blood vessel walls, speeds up artery clogging, raises blood pressure, and makes the heart work harder. If you need help quitting, call the Montana Tobacco Quit Line at 1-800-QUIT-NOW.
- **High blood cholesterol** can build up in your arteries as plaque and reduce blood flow. It can also cause blood clots that can block the vessels carrying blood to your brain. Changing your diet can help you lower your cholesterol level. Eat less saturated fat and more fruits and vegetables.
- **Alcohol use** has been linked to stroke in many studies. It can raise your blood pressure and cholesterol. Most doctors recommend not drinking or drinking only in moderation – no more than two drinks a day.
- **Diabetes** often is associated with health problems that also are stroke risk factors, like being overweight. If you have diabetes, work with your doctor and a dietitian to manage it.
- **Excess weight** strains the circulatory system. You know the drill: Exercise five times a week. Maintain a diet low in calories, saturated and trans fats, and dietary cholesterol. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables daily. To find out how many servings of produce you need, see [www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov](http://www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov)
- **Hormone replacement therapy** increases the risk of stroke in women after menopause. Talk to your doctor if this is a concern for you.
- **Sleep apnea**, which involves pauses in your breathing while you're sleeping, may increase your risk of stroke. Research shows that treating sleep apnea can reduce blood pressure.

If you'd like to know your personal risk for stroke, check out the Stroke Risk Scorecard developed by the National Stroke Association. Go to [www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org) and click on "Risk Factors" under the Prevention tab.

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For more information about the signs and treatment of stroke, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [www.cdc.gov/stroke/](http://www.cdc.gov/stroke/)

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